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ABSTRACT

In September 1989, Masconomet Regional High School in Topsfield, Massachusetts, initiated a school-restructuring program called the Renaissance Program. Although the program was highly successful, the school committee voted to discontinue it in October 1990. This paper, written by a teacher at the high school, tries to understand why the program met with heated resistance. Renpro, as the program came to be called, enrolled one-half of the incoming freshman class; the other half was enrolled in the traditional program, or Tradpro. Enrollment in Renpro was voluntary. The Renpro students took two academic courses at a time every 60 days (or 3 trimesters) during the 180-day school year, completing a minimum total of 6 academic courses a year. Academic classes were held in the mornings (100 minutes each the first year, and 118 minutes each the second and final year), leaving afternoons free for other teacher and student activities. Renpro students demonstrated gains in their writing, problem-solving, and collaboration skills; and Renpro students, parents, and teachers reported satisfaction. It is argued that although traditional schools instill feelings of powerlessness and boredom among students, promote conformity, devalue teaching experience and academic excellence, and rationalize failure, they represent a ritualized, collective experience in the American culture. Regularities are retained in the high school to ensure that children share the experience of their parents. The schools possess, in this sense, a ritual value--the "walkabout" value. In other words, Renpro violated the regularities of time and space and the formalities of curricula. The only way to break the hold that current ritualized practices have on schools is to first change practice. Contains 14 references. (LMI)

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# High School: The American Walkabout

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Occasional Paper Series: Volume X, Number 2

**The Regional Laboratory**
*for Educational Improvement of the Northeast & Islands*
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## About the Author

David F. Donavel teaches English at Masconomet Regional High School in Topsfield, Massachusetts. During his 20-year teaching career he has written extensively on educational topics and served as a consultant on restructuring to school districts throughout the country.

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# Preface

*In September of 1989, Masconomet Regional High School in Topsfield, Massachusetts, initiated a school restructuring program called the Renaissance Program. Although it was highly successful, the school committee voted to discontinue it in October of 1990.*

*This paper grows out of my personal inability to understand how sensible people acted in what appeared to be a thoroughly irrational manner by ending the successful Renaissance Program. The paper is not a piece of research; nor a call to educational arms; nor a theoretical proposal for school reform. Rather, it is a meditation on high schools from someone who's taught high school for 20 years. It is intended as an intellectual proposal. For some readers parts of this paper will be old news, for others who are new to the issue of school reform, parts may seem cryptic and obscure. I did not want to recapitulate all the widely recognized shortcomings of our high schools. But at the same time, I did not want to assume that a reader would be familiar with everything that can and does go wrong in them.*

*I wrote this largely as if there were no school reform movement in the United States. I am aware of it. Indeed, the Renaissance Program quickly gained national attention as an attractive model for improving high schools. The issue is not that we lack exciting experiments. There are many of them, and brave and innovative educators in them are achieving fine results. The issue rather is that we cling to the old ways even as we learn that we could run our schools more effectively.*

*By "we" I mean the part of all of us that is inclined to accept the way things are in an unthinking almost unconscious way. Everyone does this with respect to most of the social or cultural arrangements he normally encounters. Considered in this context, it makes sense to say about Americans such things as "we" support professional sports, even though not everyone supports professional sports. As a culture, those statements are largely true, and it is in this sense that I use that collective pronoun, "we."*

*My experience and point of view are limited. I am one person in one school. Yet I have grand ambitions here. I would like to start to change the national conversation about schools to focus on what we really do, not on what we think we do. If we make that change, we might then see our way clear to building high schools that our young people might more profitably use.*

*"Students go to school, in part, to learn how to sustain work performances and to internalize other norms of adult society."*
*-Dan C. Lortie*

*"I guess I am here [in school] because it's a culture ritual."*
*- Student*

In September of 1989 Masconomet Regional High School initiated a restructuring project called the Renaissance Program. It was the brainchild of Dr. Joseph M. Carroll, superintendent at that time. Renpro, as it came to be called, enrolled one half of the incoming freshman class. The other half was enrolled in the traditional program, or Tradpro. Enrollment in the Renpro was voluntary. The fact that the class divided itself nearly equally between the two programs was a matter of chance, not design. That division did, however, create conditions favorable to a comparative study, which was conducted by a team from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Because it's important to understand what is at stake in the current reluctance to change schools, I am offering a brief description of the Renpro and a short account of some of the highlights of the experience for those involved. Accounts of much greater detail are available in *The Copernican Plan: Restructuring the American High School*, 1989, and *The Copernican Plan Evaluated: The Evolution of the Revolution* 1994, both by Dr. Carroll.

The Renpro differed from the traditional program most dramatically in that students took two courses at a time for 60 days and took final exams at the end of that period. Then they moved on to two new courses for another 60 day period. There were three of these trimesters across the 180 day school year, and students took a minimum of six academic courses a year. Teachers in the program had a similar schedule, teaching two classes each trimester, and six across the year. Classes met in the mornings for 100 minutes each the first year Renpro was in operation and for 118 minutes each the second and final year. In the afternoons teachers and students were busy with meetings, band, and physical education. But the heart of the program involved the reallocation of time for both students and

staff in connection with major academic courses that were taught in the block schedule.

The motive for making this change was that students in our school, like students in virtually all traditionally structured high schools, did not perform as well as they might. Our own local needs assessment revealed that kids too often failed to make the effort to think carefully about hard topics and were inclined to accept uncritically the first answer that came into their heads. They didn't remember very well what they had learned and were reluctant to apply the learning in one discipline to another. In addition, they seemed to consider that the responsibility for their education was someone else's. They acted as if education was something that happened to them, rather than something they did; as if it was something to be owned, not an on-going process of inquiry. They were, in short, intellectually lazy. It may be important to understand that Masconomet is one of the best public high schools in Massachusetts according to the usual traditional measures — SAT scores, other test scores, college acceptances, and attendance and drop out rates. It is important to remember that the outline of the deficiencies of students at our school is almost an exact replica of similar outlines in studies such as John Goodlad's *Place Called School*, Charles Silberman's *Crisis in the Classroom*, and Arthur G. Powell's, Eleanor Farrar's and David K. Cohen's *The Shopping Mall High School*. That is, our problems are not only ours. This carries some significance. If it is the case that kids in high schools across the United States "present" in the same way, it may be that they do so because the schools they are in are fundamentally similar in structure. Would kids living out a different pattern, working in a different environment, develop different intellectual and academic attitudes and habits?

The rationale for the Renpro was that under a traditional structure in which students take a minimum of five major academic courses at once and teachers generally see over 100 students each day, everyone has too much to do. Consequently no one does anything really well. Renpro addressed the frenetic nature of the work day by reducing a student's work load from five to two courses at any given time and reducing the number of students that teachers worked with at one time. Fewer interpersonal interactions a day and extended class time also allowed for a much higher level of interaction between teachers and students and between students themselves. Teaching and learning became personalized for each student to a degree that was and is impossible under a traditional

structure. And, because of the increase in personalization and the increase in time, the pace of instruction actually slowed even though we were "covering" 180 days worth of material in one third that time.

During the summer of 1989 the nine teachers who had volunteered to teach in the Renpro reworked curricula so as to make it fit the new time frame. Because we wanted to compare the Renpro structure to the Tradpro structure, we did not make the alterations in the curricula that the block scheduling invited. Neither the students nor the teachers would be able to sustain interest in teacher centered classes for long periods of time and so part of our preparations involved devising classroom strategies that would be more student centered and involve more "thinking and doing" on the part of kids. We eagerly embraced the idea of "student as worker, teacher as coach" put forward by Theodore Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools.

When we came to school that fall, we were prepared. We were also terrified. I, for example, had grown used to teaching honors level juniors and advanced placement English. I had not taught ninth graders for a decade. Teachers who knew them whispered in my ear that "they were a separate breed." The program also had created a good deal of controversy among the teachers, many of whom feared that Renpro, which was strongly supported by the administration, would be forced upon them. Feelings ran pretty high with some teachers, and those of us in the program endured our share of sarcasm, resentment, and ridicule, even before we started. Were the project to be a disaster, we would suffer strong personal and professional embarrassment.

What I recall about the first day in the long classes was how easy it was. After I got over my initial anxiety, the class flowed smoothly. All the dire predictions about ninth graders being incapable of paying attention for 100 minutes failed to materialize. After I had finished my first two classes in the Renpro and had talked to the other eight teachers, I was elated, a little disbelieving, and a little shocked at how well that first day went. And the best news was that the students had had a good day as well. No chaos. No rebellions of the bored. Everyone liked it.

As the weeks turned into months and as the first trimester passed, enthusiasm for Renpro among teachers and students continued to grow, and it certainly looked as if kids were both learning and enjoying school more. As we got to know kids better, and as they got

to know us and each other better, there grew an affinity between people that is unusual in a typical high school. Our school within a school had a lot of the emotional tone of an intimate and successful private school, an unexpected development everyone involved seemed to enjoy.

The experience of teaching in the new structure was soon positive enough to convince me and virtually all the other teachers in the program not only that the old way was not the only way, but also that the old way was a great deal less effective than the Renpro way. It was clear to us that students were learning at least as well as they ever had in our experience as teachers. But what was even more gratifying was that both students and their parents reported that for the first time in many cases, the kids really liked school.

However, anecdotal evidence does not make a strong case except in fiction, and it is at this point that the evaluation conducted by the team from Harvard becomes so valuable. This group had no particular stake in the outcomes. If anyone could assess whether our impressions were valid, it would be this team from the outside that brought with it a wealth of experience of and in schools.

When the evaluation of the Renaissance Program — which was conducted and reported to the school district in an ongoing fashion — came in, we were not surprised, of course, to see reported that kids and teachers in the Renpro preferred it to the Traditional Program. We were, however, a little anxious about whether Renpro kids were learning as much and as well as their counterparts. There was every reason to believe that Renpro kids would not perform as well. In the beginning, the Harvard evaluation team had used the Iowa Test of Basic Skills to gauge the differences between the Renpro and Tradpro students. The scores revealed that upon entering ninth grade the Tradpro students had "significantly higher reading ability than the Renpro students" and that they were more able in math as well, although the differences in math were not as great. In addition, Renpro kids were in class about 20% less than Tradpro kids and were taking, on average, 13% more credits. Finally, the Renpro was new, and we were aware that the "natural history" of a new program is that results dip before they climb. Also, there were portions of the program that were not working as well as we would have liked. All of this would lead a sensible odds maker to predict that the Renpro kids would come in on the evaluation somewhere behind their Tradpro counterparts — at least at the outset.

It was, then, especially pleasing to learn that kids in Renpro equalled or outperformed their Tradpro peers on every academic measure. The least interesting and least important of these measures were the teacher-made final examinations given in courses that were taught in both the Renpro and the Tradpro. The exams were identical in both programs. On some tests, Tradpro students did better; on others, Renpro students did better. A more significant measure was the essay portion of the English exams. The evaluation team arranged for the essays to be judged by an independent English teacher who would know neither the students nor which essays came from which program. On this measure, the Renpro kids outperformed their Tradpro counterparts. Finally, in December of 1991, six months after the Renpro was discontinued, teams of students chosen randomly from the Renpro and the Tradpro were videotaped working in teams on complex problems in social studies and science. The tapes were scrutinized for behaviors suggestive of successful problem solving and successful collaboration. On this most important measure Renpro kids strongly outperformed their Tradpro counterparts.

In summary, Renpro students, starting with what most would regard as significant liabilities, did as well as or better than their more advantaged counterparts in the traditional school. And, in the most important skills measured — writing, problem solving, and collaboration — Renpro students did their best. In addition, they liked school better than kids in the Tradpro, their parents were more satisfied than parents of Tradpro students, and their teachers more pleased with their work than they had been in the past and more pleased than their Tradpro counterparts. The Renpro, by virtually all measures, proved to be a more successful way of organizing our high school than the Tradpro.

## Renpro Rejected

So, what happened? Why did the school district discontinue the program? If it really was superior, why didn't the entire high school move to a Renpro structure? Why did it return to the organization that it had just spent two years discrediting? These are the questions that the remainder of this article will try to answer. They are questions that have plagued me personally ever since October of 1990 when the School Committee voted to discontinue Renpro.

The "official" reason for the decision was that the school district needed to pass an override of Proposition 2 1/2, a Massachusetts state law that caps local tax increases, and that the likelihood of doing so with the controversial Renpro in the school was small. Therefore, according to the official reason, the School Committee responsibly voted to do away with Renpro for the sake of the larger program. While all this is accurate, the official version fails to account for the toxic virility of the feelings against the program. It observes that Renpro was controversial, but fails to examine why, and so this is, at last, no explanation at all. The question remains, why did people object so strenuously to an attempt to improve a school? What was really at stake?

The resistance to Renpro from the outset was centered in a group of parents of high performing students, kids who chose to stay in the traditional school. One father, in September of 1989 even as the program was just starting, told me he planned to run a "holy war" against it, and he emerged as a leader of those who objected to Renpro. For a long time, therefore, I vaguely believed that these parents were worried that their children would lose status in school if other, more regular students were able to succeed. I thought the parents were simply working to preserve privilege. I could understand that, but it seemed awfully dark, even malign. I knew many of these parents, and they weren't evil people. They didn't even seem terribly selfish. They were certainly well educated, articulate, and in the past deeply supportive of my efforts with their own children. I didn't doubt they had respect for me and for the other teachers in the program. Still, I had no way to understand them other than that they were working to maintain a status quo favorable to their kids. But that sane if discouraging political agenda failed to account for the deep intensity of the anti-Renpro sentiment we encountered.

It also failed to account for the seriousness with which people voiced what seemed to be the most trivial of concerns. Parents, for example, stood up in public meetings and offered the fact that the Renpro "split the class" as a reason that it must go. They were seriously and deeply worried, it appeared, about social changes a split class created. These concerns and the intensity of emotion were things my "political agenda" theory could not account for. The father's metaphor of a "holy war" was holding up. Clearly there was more at stake than a threat to the class rank of kids who were bound to end up in the top percentiles regardless of which program they were in.

It may be useful here to remember that the story of Renpro and its demise is not unusual in the recent history of school reform. Indeed, I have chosen to write all this precisely because our experience is not unique. As Deborah W. Meier, Principal of Central Park East, one of the more famous and lasting innovative schools in the country, observes about the demise of the Bronx New School, another successful experimental school: "all over the country efforts similar to the Bronx New School face or have met similar fates" (Meier, 1991). It is regular for innovation to be rejected regardless of results. Indeed, reform is often spurned long before any credible measures of success or failure can be made. It was said of Masconomet as it is being said of many other schools, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." The question, of course, is what "ain't broke"? It's clear from national studies that students in the United States even at the best high schools are failing to perform as well as they might. Certainly they are failing to perform as well as students from other industrialized countries with whom they will have to compete. Yet, time and time again efforts to raise performance are greeted with angry hostility.

## School as Ritual

*"Traditions are the most important things we do. They define us as a people; they define you as a person."*
*-Memorial Day Speaker, June 1,1993*
*Masconomet Regional High School*

*"With mankind, forms, measured forms, are everything"*
*-Captain Vere in Herman Melville's Billy Budd*

*"School is the way a community has an identity."*
*-Stuart Deane, teacher*

We must conclude that there is something that "ain't broke," something about our schools that we want to keep. Our schools, even as they fail to prepare our children for life and work in the 21st century, perform functions so valuable that we are loathe to change for fear of losing those functions. It is my contention that rather than being the failed institutions some claim them to be, schools are, in fact, sterling successes. They are carrying out a complex set of tasks we not only have come to prize in this country, but that are also central to our lives as a people. The functions the schools perform are

the functions of tradition. They provide us with the sense that our lives have meaning. The school, especially the high school, is nothing if not traditional and so has become the means by which people in our culture come to know who they are. Thus, any attempt at change violates our sense of who we are.

High school, in its repetition of forms, is the place our culture carries out its ritualized initiations. High school is the passage to adulthood, and those parts of it that at first seem extraneous — the senior prom, Friday night football, the powerless charade of student council, detention — are in fact the sacred experiences, the iconic events, deeply formal passages that draw the individual from the world of childhood into the world of the fully grown. These traditions, these forms, are as loaded with meaning as our Thanksgiving turkeys and our Christmas trees. To impose a change in forms on the high schools inspires the same feelings of outrage as would a prohibition against those turkeys and trees. To change the form is to change the substance.

The culminating event, the "one way" experience, the transformational passage is high school graduation. In the United States there is no other shared moment as powerful as that day in June when the individual at last leaves school. He can never return again to the state of childhood he lived in even the week before. The change, of course, is not in him. It is in our collective expectations for him. He is no longer a child. He is an adult and is expected to act as an adult. He can return to the high school for visits, but he no longer belongs. Indeed, on return visits only months after they have left high school, former students often report that current students look small to them. I take this observation to mean that the graduate has internalized a different sense of himself: he is now big, an adult. Neither college graduation, marriage, induction into the armed service, nor parenthood is marked by such a deep change in the status of the individual as is high school graduation. High school is the North American version of the aboriginal walkabout and climaxes at the moment when the graduates toss their mortar boards into the air and cry their departure forever from the world of childhood.

This passage through high school carries political and economic value as well, so that the end result is complex and tangled and only partly rationalized. To fail to pass through these formal events, to attend a school where the focus lies elsewhere, is to fail to join the world in which the older generation lives.

## Regularities of Time and Space

The model of high school as the keeper of the sacred folkways and the ritualizing location in our culture is so foreign to the standard and overt explanation for high school that it is easy to reject it out of hand. But there is almost nothing in standard high school practice conducive to intellectual growth or excellence on the part of either students or teachers.

High schools operate according to folk wisdom. We do in schools what we did before and those who oppose that don't last. For example, we are convinced that age-grading makes sense. If you're sixteen, you are in the eleventh grade — or close to it — or you've done it wrong. That is, eleventh grade is for sixteen-year-old people, not because the intellectual tasks are fit for sixteen year olds but because almost all eleventh graders are sixteen. Graduation is something you do with your age-graded class and has very little to do with what you've learned. Age grading reflects an almost agricultural notion that children come in yearly "crops" that pass through the seasons of childhood and out of it in a ripening cluster. To separate them out by intellectual or academic growth or skill acquisition feels unnatural.

Some of the other "natural" ways of conducting high schooling center on the use of space and time. We believe it is, for example, valuable and natural that school be compulsory. We think high school classes should meet on a daily basis, that kids should always sit in the same seats in those classes, that those classes should be approximately 45 minutes long, and that there should be six to eight of them every day. All movement, interaction, thought, and reflection are paced according to the demands of the bell schedule — the rule of the clock. Schooling, we believe, takes place in encapsulated classrooms where one adult is "in charge" of a number of young people who are earning credits primarily by attending class for the better part of 180 days between September and June.

Similarly, the school year has a pattern and rhythm to it tied not so much to the seasons as it is to internal school events such as the four marking periods, high profile social events like the prom and the senior theatrical production, and of course, the vacations. These events are something akin to the celebrations of the church that mark the points in the year. Like those celebrations, school events bear a relation to seasonal changes, but that relation is for the most

part merely formalized. There is an unmistakable feel to schools in April that is quite different from the feel of school life in October, and the difference is not due to the facts of spring and fall, but rather to the movement through the almost organic cycle of the school year. Indeed, life is more stale in April than in October. As the seasonal year enters a rebirth, the school year has achieved a maturity, and those in the high school building have by April come to terms with their relationships with each other and with whatever learning and teaching achievements they have made. There is by April the first hint of closing down, of settling accounts. Kids are accepted into college, the schedule for September is almost always established, the budget has been written, the books ordered. We begin to close up shop just as farmers might in November make whatever bedding arrangements the land requires for its winter rest.

To work in a high school as students and teachers do is to spend one's days in an environment strangely separated from the world outside the school, a world often referred to by those inside as "the real world." For students this sense of unreality is especially acute. Kids pass through these years as if in a kind of limbo with a sense both keen and vague that real life somehow will start once they're "outta here."

As time is static in schools (despite all the student attention to the clock), the work students do is similarly aimless and ritualized. Academics are largely "academic" and that explains why we offer so little "hands-on" or, in the parlance of current school reformers, "authentic" learning. There is a kind of anesthetized sameness to most of what is studied in school that bores most kids into glassy-eyed trances. Those students who get good grades, that is, who fight off the boredom, often do so by employing what one might call "school thought," a successful manipulation of language, symbols, and memory to get through the assignments and examinations in school. "Real thought," however, is something students save for real life, and the gap between the two is often unbridged and, worse, even unnoticed.

If we were interested in preparing students for success in the "real world," we would behave as if we were. High school students would practice proficiency in what we admire in adults. They might work collaboratively, employ their skills in solving problems, come to value good oral and written articulation, work to become more tolerant and understanding. As it is currently, success in high school

is almost always defined as doing well on paper and pencil tests. In addition, there are no real penalties for failure and no real rewards for "success." If kids fail to learn in school, they still pass. The diploma they receive at the end of the process is worth no less than the valedictorian's.

With respect to curricula, we also have items of inviolable folk wisdom. Some of these are that learning occurs in disciplines and that the major ones are English, science, social studies, foreign language, and mathematics. Of these, the hardest is math. The other disciplines, such as studio art, music, physical education, business, and occupational education are minor. Minor disciplines don't matter much.

We understand that classrooms are places where teachers, not students, talk and ask questions, and a good teacher is one who knows the answers to his own questions. We know that when attention in the classroom is focused on the teacher, effective instruction is occurring. We know that when kids are talking to each other something "loosey-goosey" is going on, and that is bad. We believe kids must learn the basics in a given discipline before they can move up to higher order thinking and, in concert with that, school is for "exposing students to material." In connection with this last belief is the idea in my discipline, English, that it is important that kids never read the same book for credit twice in their high school career.

Our disputes over curricular issues become, in this context, somewhat amusing. Over the last few years, for example, we have been wondering how to include in our humanities courses material having to do with women and minorities. Our newspapers and professional journals are given to printing articles explaining how we can go about becoming more multicultural or questioning the value of it. It may be that the curricular alterations many are proposing will cause positive changes in the lives of kids. On the other hand, they may not. It is probably worth some time and effort to try them and find out. But what is clear is that we don't squabble about what really matters in schools. There's very little real discussion about examining the ritual forms that we cherish: age grading, learning by disciplines, or the structure of the school day.

Seriously call into question any of these most questionable pieces of folk wisdom and you immediately violate that sense of naturalness that most people feel about high school. There is very little by way

of rational defense for the current structure. Unless I have missed it, no one argues seriously for the effectiveness of this arrangement nor for the effectiveness even of parts of it. Indeed, when we send our children to college we're perfectly content that each and every one of these high school regularities might be abrogated. And we do not regard college as somehow a diminished opportunity for intellectual growth. On the contrary, college is where we expect the minds of our offspring to blossom. So it is clear that the regularities in the high school are not in place to insure learning and teaching, but rather to insure that we retain regularities in the high school, that is, to insure that our children pass through the same kind of experience we ourselves passed through on their way to being full adults.

It is this ritual value, the "walkabout" value, that we cherish and, at the same time, don't recognize that gives rise to our inarticulate rejection of even the slightest change in those regularities. In fact, none of these regularities have been demonstrated to be especially conducive to learning and teaching, but it is almost impossible even to discuss them calmly and weigh their merits as useful or harmful practices. The regularities of time and space and the formalities of curricula are ways of recapitulating for young people the experience of adults.

And, of course, Renpro violated them wholesale. Seen in this context, Renpro never stood a chance. A "holy war" aimed at a school trying to reconstruct itself on academic achievement, seemingly at the expense of even some of these formalities, makes excellent sense. It is fitting that school reform, understood as an effort to change the school from an institution of ritual initiation to one designed for high-powered critical intellectual growth, would engender the kind of fury that we saw and that others see almost anywhere serious school reform is tried.

As a rite of passage, school works surprisingly well. Assuming a child is in school for 180 days a year, six hours a day for twelve years, she will have spent nearly 13,000 hours as a student, about 18% of her waking life. By the time she is a senior, she has reached a keen appreciation that school is for kids and is at a point in her life when she longs to be something else. High school seniors, as opposed to their college counterparts, must develop an impatient scorn for school, an almost physical itch to leave. What they shed at the moment of graduation is shattered, fragmentary, arbitrary, throw-away experience, exactly those things that would be most in-

furiating to people at a point in their lives when they are hungry to find meaning. It is no wonder that graduation comes as such a release, that kids really do explode in cheers when they are finally liberated from the constraints the school, in so many ways, has placed upon them.

But if the school has done its initiation work properly, the students it releases every June are, despite whatever deficiencies they may have as mathematicians, historians, or writers, well educated. To discern what it is that our high school graduates have learned in school is to pay attention to what they lived. We don't acquire our most deeply held values and beliefs because someone told us to cherish them. We hold values and beliefs because we have lived them out. When the time comes to think about what we hold dear, certain truths are so deeply embedded in us that we don't even know we hold them as truths. Until we can bring to the surface the assumptions that lie as if within our bones, we won't know who we are or what we're doing.

## The Experience of Powerlessness

*"It doesn't matter if students like school. As long as a student follows the rules, his likes and dislikes are ignored."*
*- Student*

The experience that lies at the center of passing through high school, and the experience that is of greatest instructional value, is the experience of powerlessness. Historically powerlessness grew out of the necessity to fit workers for the factory. Aside from that, it has the value of taming what otherwise might be unruly young people.

Teaching people powerlessness allows for a greater measure of social control than we might otherwise have. But beyond that, we seem to want the experience of powerlessness for our children largely because that's what we recall school as being.

Every new teacher learns almost immediately that what is valued by her supervisors is that she maintain control. The new teacher also discovers that it doesn't matter to anyone at all if her students don't learn very much. As long as she "keeps the lid on" and, to a somewhat lesser extent keeps the students happy, she'll be fine.

American Federation of Teachers President Albert Shanker recounts his rookie experience this way: "I was in constant fear that the principal would walk by and see that there was pandemonium in my class. So I asked other teachers what I should do. And they said, 'If you want the kids to be quiet, give them lots of seat work.'" That was in the 1950's and it's no different today. Shanker continues, "teachers know that no one will notice if their students learn less than they might. On the other hand, if the principal finds the class in chaos, the teacher could be in a lot of trouble" (Shanker, 1993).

If we really cared about learning, principals would know if kids in their schools weren't learning. But most of them don't know. In the great majority of high schools in the United States the educational leaders lack a clearly measured idea of what skills and knowledge their graduates have mastered. So it's hard to credit the claim that keeping control is valued because it facilitates learning. Keeping control in fact is valued for it's own sake.

That principals are doing a fine job of keeping the lid on in most high schools is a fact often unappreciated. Many high schools are safe places most of the time and are supremely well controlled; thoughtful members of the public might sensibly be concerned at the level of regulation.

Recently a colleague showed me a document called "Factory Rules" which was a listing of the regulations under which workers labored in an early 19th century Austrian factory. The document was published in a social studies curriculum packet with the intent of demonstrating the harsh conditions under which workers had to make a living, conditions which brought to my mind immediately the Coketown of Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*. I made photocopies of "Factory Rules" and gave it to a class of students in connection with our own studies. A couple of days later one student submitted to me a re-write of the document in which, with very slight changes, he demonstrated that our students labor under virtually the same set of rules that governed the factory of 160 years ago.

## Responsibility Is Not Obedience

*"School gives no chance for independent thought. Instead it insists on letting the teachers . . . make decisions for the students."*

*-Student*

*"I stopped liking school because teachers have total control over you."*

*-Student*

*"School is good to help you learn about rules and how to follow them."*

*-Student*

High school teachers and administrators are endlessly admonishing students to "be responsible" by which they simply mean "be obedient." The difference between responsibility and obedience is power. I am not able to respond, that is, I cannot be responsible, if I have no power. I can either be obedient or I can be bad, and those are the only choices we offer kids in high school. There is no real avenue for responsible and respectful noncompliance with the rules.

We pay lip service to the virtues of democracy, and urge students to run for student council positions and to vote in the elections we hold for such offices, but, because who wins is profoundly inconsequential in the lives of kids, the elections are mere popularity contests. Student council is something you do in high school to beef up your college application packet. Kids who aren't planning on college usually don't bother themselves with "student government." For them, it's a waste of time.

But once again, it's critical to remember that if we wanted to change this situation, we could. Any tenth grader can, given half an hour's thought, imagine serious and viable ways in which school could be less like a prison. Adults responsible for school policy could easily find arenas in which kids could be in charge, areas where the institution could take some risks, let kids alone, in the hope that at least some of them would gain a sense of their own potency. That there are in the United States so few high schools moving in anything like this direction speaks loudly to the fact that we do not find it desirable. What we want is what we have, a system where kids are powerless and learn to mistake docile obedience for democratic responsibility. Seymour Sarason writes that "when children start

school, a message is conveyed to them that is as influential as it is subtle and unverbalized: 'Forget or set aside your world of questions and interests. Your job, our responsibility, is to get you to learn rules, facts, and skills, without which you are nothing.'" (Sarason, 1990). To be in a high school, to watch the way docility is rewarded and powerlessness prized, is to see not only that Sarason is correct, but that the system that we have is no mistake.

Like students, teachers are to be treated the same, regardless of individual differences. In fact, it is something like bad manners to notice that teachers have individual differences, especially with respect to teaching skill. Merit pay, one way to significantly and concretely acknowledge and measure important differences between teachers, is almost universally regarded as engendering dissension and discontent in a faculty rather than serving as an incentive to improved work. Most teacher union people want nothing to do with it, hoping instead to engineer raises for all teachers in a school or district. The result of the belief that all teachers are equal is that teachers, living out the experience of a flat and monochromatic "fairness," find themselves in an excellent position to teach it to students. Just as teachers resent a colleague who appears to be receiving preferential treatment, so do teachers resent students who expect that they should be treated as individuals. If we truly cherished individualism, we would arrange our schools in such a way that, as Theodore Sizer suggests, we could teach kids "one at a time." That we don't in the face of the technical knowledge that we can is further testament to the fact that in high school, individualism, either of the student or the teacher, is not a quality we value.

## School as Trivia

*"Learning isn't fun. It is just one of many things you have to do."*
*-Student*

*"I never liked school when I was younger . . . because I was shy and wanted to be with my Mom. Now I don't like it because I'm not interested, but I like being with my friends."*
*-Student*

*"The good thing about school is your friends."*
*-Student*

The work most students do in school, and the places they work in are almost always dreary and barren. Even those buildings that are newer and decently maintained, are, in comparison with other work spaces in our culture, remarkably grim. Those schools that have been allowed to run down in the way Jonathan Kozol details in his book *Savage Inequalities* emphatically proclaim the non-person status of students and teachers and the profound unimportance of their work.

For almost all students, the work in school is deeply pointless and, as a consequence, kids are commonly and chronically bored. School people blame the boredom in students on almost anything but the structures of the school itself. In our lifetime, it's been television and a culture of instant gratification that, we say, gets in the way of an appetite for the hard and dry work that schoolwork "necessarily" is. But there is nothing intrinsically dull about history or literature or mathematics. Indeed, these are some of the most wonderful of human achievements and kids, as Sarason has observed, come to school full of curiosity which they soon lose. Indeed, it is a commonplace of education reformers that schools, in their regimented dullness, destroy the very qualities in children — curiosity, intellectual liveliness — that school people complain kids lack. But the fact that we never change our schools to nourish rather than stifle the innate inquisitiveness of kids attests to the fact that this quelling agenda is precisely what we want. If kids are to learn the lesson of powerlessness, they must also learn that schoolwork is both dull and valueless. People who work on things that matter, matter themselves. They have, as a consequence, the feeling of potency that schools work so hard to deny.

The valuelessness of schoolwork in the high school is underscored daily, indeed, almost hourly, by the continual series of interruptions that disturb the classroom. One of the regularities in the high school is that it is legitimate to intrude on classroom activities for virtually any reason at all. That means, of course, that anything is more important than whatever may be going on between a teacher and his students. Kids are pulled out of class for sports physicals, yearbook photos, disciplinary reasons, doctor's appointments, meetings with guidance counselors, even picking up a lunch in the office that Mom brought to school. And the entire school is interrupted for announcements over the intercom about canceled track practice or a change in the driver education class — announcements that usually affect only a tiny minority of students. These interruptions are so

much a part of the fabric of high school life that they are taken for granted. But imagine for a moment the English teacher stopping football practice to make an announcement about a reading assignment that affected only two of the players. Those who know high schools will smile at the idea. Football matters. That is, in the world of school, football matters. Football is also essentially trivial and so while students may gain a sense of their potency from playing it, they also know that it's a schoolboy's potency — one that once again somehow just doesn't count for much.

## The Experience of Shame

*"School is almost always evaluative. Going to school means living under a constant condition of having one's words and deeds evaluated by others. Given the way in which the evaluation is usually handled, this in turn means a sharp demarcation of power and authority between student and teacher. The teacher is not only the one who keeps the child in school, he is also the one who evaluates him."*

*-Charles E. Silberman*

*"I stopped liking school in the third grade because I became stupid then and I was always taken out of class for extra help and when I came back to class I was always behind."*

*-Student*

*"In the public eye, kids aren't supposed to like school."*

*-Student*

*"I am afraid to do good because bad grades are expected of me and that is just easier."*

*-Student*

If the most important lesson the school teaches is powerlessness, the second most important lesson is that someone else is better — the lesson of shame. The business of rating and sorting children so permeates school that learning situations in which there are no evaluations are barely recognizable as learning situations.

School is where people get graded. We got graded when we were in school, and we expect our children to undergo the same. When we ask students how they are doing in school, we are asking about grades, not whether they are learning.

Since grading is one of the ritual regularities in keeping school, it will not surprise anyone to learn that it is surrounded with unexamined assumptions. The most basic of these is perhaps also the most pernicious. It is that good grades means a student is smart, and poor grades means she is not. Correlative to this is the notion that grades truly reflect a student's ability. A third and more easily challenged idea is that grades accurately measure achievement and are necessary for a student and her teacher to know how well she is doing.

Grading leads us to the conclusion that kids who excel in school are better people than those who do not. And this lesson is one of the very first schools teach. Even the youngest of students understand almost immediately that the evaluations they receive on their report cards are not mere diagnostic indicators of areas of strength and weakness. Those grades are sources of pride and shame because they feel not at all like evaluations of a child's work, but rather like an evaluation of the child herself. That this shame at poor grades is destructive of motivation and a sense of self-worth is fairly easy to see. Harder to comprehend is the destructive nature of the pride kids feel at being better than their peers.

Like the lesson in powerlessness, the lesson in shame is absorbed as if through the skin. Kids don't walk around with their heads down feeling "bad about themselves." Most of them simply accept the "fact" that there are other kids who are better. In light of the fact that human beings often exceed the expectations others have for them, the claim of school people that it's important for kids to be realistic, accepting of their capacities, is both arrogant and cruel.

Nevertheless, the ritual and political comfort we take from keeping the regularity of rating kids seems to outweigh the damage we do our children. In the high school the truth of this is demonstrated in our almost fanatical devotion to tracking. Despite considerable evidence that tracking is politically motivated and educationally unsound, the idea that it effectively meets the needs of all students is almost impossible to challenge in practice.

It is, however, profitable to consider the effects on non-honors students of having an "honors" track in a high school. Rather than being an incentive to excellence, it turns out to be an occasion for despair. Teachers' exhortations to excellence delivered to the middle or low level tracks fall on indifferent ears because, despite the best intentions of any instructor, the larger institution has structured itself to announce to these students that the real intellectual work is going on in a different room, at a different rate, for kids who are the ones who are really smart. The work middle or low level kids do is experienced as second rate. The bar to true excellence that tracking represents says to kids that being smart is not a matter of effort, but a mysterious matter of nature.

## Failure Rationalized

That high school kids find failure acceptable is, but should not be, something inscrutable to school people. Barred from success by a rating system that is reflective of race and class and nearly as unyielding as a caste system, how could failure be anything but acceptable? And how could school be anything but "boring," the nearly universal word of complaint? But while students do say they are bored, they don't say out loud that failure is acceptable, but rather that academic success is not. Students who get good grades, in one of the many paradoxes of school life, are "better" but are also often "nerds." They "don't have a life." They are not "well-rounded," a phrase that serves as a cover for a multitude of short-comings students feel are their own. If you are well-rounded it's OK to be poor at a specific school discipline. In fact, being well-rounded is regarded as a valuable life skill. The well-rounded person is always socially adept, and the social life at school is, for most kids, the only thing about it that is alive. Being an athlete in most schools is the best way to be well-rounded and usually carries a large measure of social acceptability. The intense interest many communities have in the local high school sports teams, especially the football team, reflects, I think, the experience that most of us had in high school. Athletics were for most of us comprehensible, a way of finding a loyalty to a group and so a pathway to meaning, and a refuge from the frustrating absurdity of regular schoolwork.

Those few who enjoy private school or who are in the highest tracks in our best public schools, by contrast, learn that, while they have

little power now, they will have much later on and that schoolwork is, in fact, both fascinating and rewarding. The result of these differences is that the privileged grow to expect that they will someday run the institutions of our society, and the rest of us learn that we will not.

Charles Dickens's figure of Stephen Blackpool, from *Hard Times*, provides a pathetic and powerful example of a man who knows that his relation to the workplace and to the laws of the land are not right, but who cannot think it through. He lacks the intellectual tools to do so. For Stephen all is a confusing "muddle," and he comes to a sorry end in a literal pitfall. While most of our high school graduates will not literally tumble down abandoned mine shafts, by finding it "nerdy" to use their minds well, they may live their lives in as profound a darkness. While this may seem a fine convenience for those whose lives have been blessed by privilege, it remains a question whether the country can continue to afford to let the majority of its people languish.

## Powerlessness Dressed as Citizenship

In high school, citizenship usually means that a student does not litter, respects his elders, pledges the flag, does not use offensive language in the corridors, does not cheat on tests, abides by the dress code, is prompt for class, and so on. If this is really what we mean by citizenship, then it should not surprise us that a good many of our students are bored by the idea. What we offer as citizenship bears virtually no relationship to the qualities we admire in adults we regard as good citizens: an informed involvement in community affairs, an intellectual distinctness, a willingness to take personal risks for the sake of the community. These opportunities are available in a merely formal, that is deeply inconsequential, way for the tiny minority of students who concern themselves with student government, but for most kids, being a good citizen is merely obeying the rules and so, ironically, "citizenship" becomes yet another lesson in powerlessness.

An especially interesting mode of "citizenship" is what we call "school spirit." Having school spirit is regarded as valuable, and kids who fail to evince some enthusiasm for the local football team are passing through the school in a way that is understood to be just

a little wrong or off. There is an excitement and pleasure in feeling pride in one's school that has the potential to be legitimate and rewarding. If the school is a real community, then supporting its collective efforts — be they athletic, artistic, or academic — becomes a mark of genuine citizenship: to the extent the community nurtures the individual, she owes a debt of support. But our schools are rarely communities. They are more like factories in both size and organization. The support and allegiance we expect students to feel for them becomes factitious. One is reminded of Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s "granfalloon" in *Cat's Cradle*. It is ludicrous to be proud of being, to use his example, a Hoosier when all that means is that you happen to live in Indiana. Similarly, it is ludicrous to be proud of being a Wildcat, when all it means is that you attend, with hundreds of other unrelated individuals, the local high school. Hoosier or Wildcat status is both accidental and unearned. Yet adults in school encourage, and are encouraged to show, school spirit. Why? The high profile nature of demonstrations of school spirit serve to falsely democratize what is essentially an elitist institution. That is, school spirit lets us believe that we are the same and so softens the differences the school underscores in its continual rating of individuals.

## The Social Arena

*"School is a place for memories."*
*-Student*

Ask any group of high school kids what the value of school is and you'll get a lot of canned answers about preparing for the future and so on. Once you get through that and down to what kids experience on a daily basis, they will invariably tell you that the most important thing they do in school is see and make friends. For most people, high school is a place for friends. (The instruction in powerlessness and shame are of prime importance but the school teaches them so thoroughly and subtly that they often go unnoticed. Indeed, a large part of my purpose here is to bring those lessons more clearly to consciousness.) An immense part of the passage from childhood to adulthood is learning to have and be a friend. Consequently, it is critical to participate in some version of the social life of the school, and almost all kids do so successfully. In this arena, kids have limited but real choices. It is the area where young people can enjoy real autonomy, and that freedom is jealously

guarded. For an adult to suggest to almost any student that he is "hanging out with the wrong crowd" is to invite a battle. The social connections between high school students is distinctly not the business of adults in the school, and this, like almost everything else in the school, is part of the ritualized experience of moving through it.

The high school prom is both demonstration of adult social/ritual capacity and preparation for it. It is for most students the most critical social/ritual event of their high school career, and virtually every student eligible to attend does so, often even reluctantly. It is something like an authentic final exam, a performance for which they have been preparing since they started having friends and since they started dating. It is a critically important part of growing up in this country and lies somewhere near the center of the ritual passage to adulthood. It makes perfect sense that this important event would be sponsored by the school, the institution in our society charged with overseeing this passage.

## The Teacher Hero

If one examines the overt role and training of teachers it is certainly easy to see how fine success is not likely. Teachers remain relatively powerless players in the institutional hierarchy. Despite this, teachers and students sometimes work together in exactly the happy way most of us would like. "Under the wing" of someone in the school, a student finds what he loves, learns to think, starts a future. That this happens at all in an institution set up primarily to teach powerlessness and shame is something like the blooming of wild flowers in the most desolate of urban landscapes.

Periodically we are treated in the popular culture to a book or a movie about teachers. The most recent film that I can recall is "Dead Poet's Society." Others include "Stand and Deliver," "Teachers," and "To Sir, With Love." In each case we are given a version of the teacher/hero. And in each case what makes the teacher a hero is a combination of defiance of the regularities of schooling and a willingness to bravely risk his very self for the sake of his students.

The films are instructive because, despite their Hollywood falseness, they speak in a more real way to the experience of teachers and students than almost anything else. What emerges is that when a

teacher is reaching kids, she has typically closed her classroom door, set aside the agenda of the institution, and has made a deeply personal connection with her students. I do not mean that the teacher has become the pal of the students or that she regales them with tales of her private life. In fact, teachers who do this often lose the respect and interest of their students. I mean that the teacher has allowed students a look at her heart and has, in turn, taken an interest in her students as individuals and has thereby allowed them a sense of their own importance. For example, in "Dead Poets Society" the students know very little about the private life of the teacher/hero. What he has revealed to them, however, is his deeply personal and acceptably public passion for the poems and stories he teaches and at the same time approached his students with the happy expectation that they will and can learn to love the literature as much as he does.

The tools the teacher uses are first his self and secondly and incidentally the curriculum. When a teacher makes contact, he does so as a human being. Teachers take immense personal, but not private, risks. They float their very selves out in front of their students almost as an offering. It is this risk, I believe, that explains the anxiety teachers feel each September, an anxiety that fails to vanish even with years of experience. The unspoken question is: What if the offering is refused? It's an awful sight, an awful feeling something akin to those bad dreams in which the dreamer finds himself in public in his underwear.

## The Teacher as Spirit Guide

If passage through high school is the ritual journey to adulthood, then the teacher bears to that passage something akin to the role of priest. The teacher is the overseer of the journey, entrusted with immense ritual and moral power. The passage is possible without the guide, of course, as graduates every June demonstrate, but with one it is easier and more directed. With a guide a young person has a deeply improved chance of emerging from the high school at the end of her senior year with direction, focus, and a sense of self.

I asked a group of mid-year seniors in my Advanced Placement English course what a teacher does when she is doing her job as well as it can be done. Here are some of their answers: "A teacher

motivates for further learning, leaves students with something memorable and useful, opens the eyes of students to new ideas. A teacher leads, but does not spoon feed. A teacher presents a point of view on living, on being. A teacher leads kids from innocence to knowledge and experience. A teacher works with students toward mutual respect and equality. A teacher inspires questions and independence. A teacher models adulthood. A teacher helps kids find a self." These are the functions the teacher/heroes of the Hollywood films perform. And if you ask teachers if it is this sort of thing that is at the core of their occupation, my guess is that most would agree. The list is intensely moral. It speaks to the deepest spiritual need: the need to find meaning in our lives and a sense of our own worthiness, the opposites of powerlessness and shame.

If teachers are the spiritual guides of young people on the ritual passage from child to adult, then we can better understand the insatiable hunger teachers have for approval and reassurance. A physician or lawyer criticized for a poor performance can point to his adherence to standard practice and, if he has failed to adhere to standard practice, can usually explain the extenuating circumstances that led him to the decision to do so. A teacher criticized for a poor performance lacks similar recourse. There is no recognized standard practice. For teachers a criticism of performance is an attack on their person, on their personality. If a teacher is "boring" or "mean" or "dorky," there is nothing like a "professional" response. One does not say, "In my professional opinion, this lesson is best taught in a 'dorky' mode." And the fact that "dorky" matters with teaching is further evidence of the primacy of the use of the self in the occupation. If your doctor is "dorky," well, so what? We go to her for different reasons than matter of personality.

The role of teacher as spirit guide also explains, I believe, the tendency of teachers to obsess over the students who fail. While a teacher wants the kind of deep response from students that's modeled in the films mentioned above, she settles for "progress." That is, she settles for a modicum of attentiveness, some evidence of growth. When little or none is forthcoming, if only in a fraction of a percent of her students, she is likely to worry about it. Some teachers literally lose sleep over the children "gone astray" and are happy to expend considerable effort trying to save them. It is reminiscent of the parable of the shepherd who risked the flock to save the stray and took such pleasure in saving the one.

This special role teachers play explains as well the fact that most teachers are immune to the training they receive in pre-service. Pre-service almost never speaks to the possibility of being a teacher/hero and what that may require and entail, and it is this possibility that calls people to the work. It should not surprise us then that teachers instruct in the way they themselves have been taught. Since virtually all teachers themselves passed through schools, new teachers come to the occupation with a willingness to comply with the institutional regularities. That is, teachers are not revolutionaries in the usual sense of that word. But it is also true that new teachers often come to the occupation with the idea that the institution really is a bit repressive, that older teachers really are a little too stuffy, and that they will be teacher/heroes. They arrive with the expectation that they can, by force of good will and happy spirit, reach students in a profound and important way. That eager young teachers so often turn into sour old ones speaks not so much to the inevitable effects of age and disillusionment as to the power of the institutional agenda of powerlessness and shame.

## The Devaluation of Experience

If a bright new teacher survives the first few years — a time when many of them decide teaching is not for them — there are a good number of years of high enthusiasm, real motivation, and faith in the occupation. The disillusion that marks so many veteran teachers is not especially fast to settle in, and it is the energy and good will of the rookie teacher that is highly valued by both the public and school people themselves. It is a commonplace that schools could be repaired if it were possible to cut out the "deadwood" — an unflattering and sometimes deserved description of tenured teachers — and replace them with some energetic young people. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has recently passed legislation making it easier for older teachers to retire so they can be replaced by younger, livelier people. And the School Committee in the district where I teach, Masconomet, has negotiated into the teachers contract, clauses encouraging early retirement and the exploration on the part of older teachers of a career change. Because this sort of practice is so commonplace, it is taken for granted, but it is worth considering that we are not as eager to trade away experience in other occupations as we are in teaching. We are unwilling to arrange our schools around the expertise of a few highly skilled

professional teachers who might be assisted by apprentices or aides. We are always much more willing to hire many teachers and pay them all modestly than to retain a few and pay them well, an arrangement that is the opposite of the one employed in medicine.

It is not only experience that is devalued in teaching. We seem to have as little regard for academic excellence. It has been and continues to be acceptable to hire as teachers students from the lower half of graduating classes from colleges that are not academically impressive. Those qualities that one might imagine we would most value in educational practitioners — experience, pedagogical skill, academic excellence — are, in practice, disregarded in favor of youthful energy, idealism, and good will. Why? The mystery disappears when we remember that the teacher is expected first to teach powerlessness, second to teach shame, and then, incidentally, to be a teacher/hero. None of this requires much experience, pedagogical skill, or academic excellence.

## Changing the Ritual

In the most fundamental way, those of us who work in schools do not know what we're doing. We imagine we're in the business of teaching skills and knowledge, but in fact we are the "priests" in the secular church whose task it is to oversee the journey of young people from childhood to adulthood and to teach them the ritual lessons of powerlessness and shame. That we do this may not be bad or evil. In fact, to the extent that schools leave open an avenue for teachers to become heroic spirit guides, it may be a credit to us. But that we remain blind to what we really do is an error, especially if our culture should become discontent with the skills and knowledge of our high school graduates. To reform our schools we must first come to an awareness of what we are actually doing in them. We must look at the bedrock assumptions and rituals that drive practice, and ask ourselves if we want to continue in the future as we have done in the past. We cannot on the one hand desire student outcomes different from the ones we are currently seeing and on the other, resist the changes that will bring about those different outcomes. Rita Mae Brown has defined insanity as "doing the same thing over and over and over again expecting different results." That definition accurately describes the weird division between school rhetoric and school action.

If we really do desire different results, we must understand that these will not result from fiddling with curricula or governance or simply adding more days to the school calendar. Fundamental change means we will have to root out and question the beliefs and assumptions so buried in our expectations of the way school is "supposed to be" that we don't even know we have them. The only way to get large numbers of people to do that questioning is to radically alter the conditions under which school people work. I am suggesting that the only way to break the hold our current ritualized practices have on schools is to *first* change practice, and then do the analysis of the change. We will not see what we are doing clearly until we are working under a different set of assumptions.

In substantially changing conditions of work the Renaissance Program provides one model. But there are others. Central Park East in New York provides another model. The Coalition of Essential Schools and The Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands could easily provide anyone interested with many handsome ideas on how to change practice. We are not short on models for improvement. But until we have people living them out, working day to day in the new models, there will be little change in the way we think about what we do.

However, it is not at all clear that we really want change. This is the fact that makes much of the talk about school reform and the change process merely academic. It may be also that our schools, at last, really are not broken. They are working to sustain powerful social and cultural arrangements, and in so doing they help keep a vast and hugely complex society stable. Those calling for sweeping educational reform often cite the declining state of our country's competitiveness as justification for wholesale restructuring of our educational system. There are, however, those who claim the United States is not losing its competitive edge, and others who cite the worldwide leveling in standard of living as an inevitable result of a global economy and a Europe released from the legacy of World War II and not a result of a faltering United States. Moreover, it is far from clear that altering our educational system would necessarily lead to a rejuvenation of productiveness.

The question, then, is "Are we content with the high school system we have?" The answer seems to be that we are. Year after year polls show that while most people are suspicious of the effectiveness of

our educational system as a whole, they are quite satisfied with the schools in their own neighborhoods. As far as most of us are concerned, the schools are fine, and our children are learning in them what we would expect them to learn in school. The customer is satisfied. While this may be frustrating to those of us who would like to see our schools much better than they are, our frustration does not alter a national contentment.

# Afterword

The author, David Donavel, raises some serious and alarming issues about the realities of high school. Given his perspective — a high school teacher for twenty years who was part of a successful restructing effort that was discontinued — his ideas cannot be ignored.

Research shows that students who attend high schools that are engaged in restructuring efforts, such as the Renaissance program, learn more and are more involved in their education.[1] Yet, as Donavel's experience shows, when schools begin to change some of their traditional methods and structures in order to become more effective, they can run into resistance both internally and from the community.

In our work with schools throughout the region, we have seen that school progress is thwarted when people within the school and within the community have differing assumptions about the purposes of school. Real, long-term progress often begins when school members and community members take the time and effort to explore and define together their beliefs about the purposes of school. Though such exploration can sound like a luxury that no one has the time for, it is in fact essential. That is why we at The Regional Laboratory make sure to provide tools that help school people and community people come together. A few of our publications that are especially useful for this include:

- *Creating New Visions for Schools: Activities for Educators, Parents, and Community Members*
- *Genuine Reward: Community Inquiry into Connecting Learning, Teaching, and Assessing.*
- *Roots of Reform: Challenging the Assumptions That Control Change in Education*

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[1]See, for example: Lee, Valerie E. and Julia B. Smith. 1994. Effects of High School Restructuring and Size Gains in Achievement and Engagement for Early Secondary School Students. *Issues in Restructuring Education*, Fall.

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